

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Esther: For Such a Time As This

Scripture: Esther

Code: 80-392

Well, I am greatly challenged on some occasions, in all honesty, as you well know, to get through one verse. This morning I made it through a whole chapter, and tonight we'll take a whole book. That's the book of Esther. You want to open your Bible, if you will, to the book of Esther, and this is in our continuing series on "Twelve Unlikely Heroes," from the Bible, the Old and the New Testament.

Through the years, we have looked at the book of Esther here at Grace Community Church and found it to be a marvelous, marvelous book. It is one of two books in the Bible in which the name of God is not mentioned. The ruler who is featured in the book, is mentioned 175 times; God is never mentioned. And yet to any reader of the book who reads with understanding, God is the main character in the book. God is putting Himself on display in amazing ways, even though He is unnamed.

Let me take you back in history. This is going to be a little bit like a lecture tonight, so hang in there. The year was 480 B.C. (I love history; you know that.) The year was 480 B.C. and a massive Persian army marched with determination to face the rebel forces of Athens and its Greek allies—Persia against the Greek powers.

Ancient sources number the Persians at a million soldiers. Or modern sources hedge on that a little bit and think it may have been hundreds of thousands. In any case, Persia is putting on a massive military display.

At the time, the Persian Empire stretched from modern-day Libya and Africa all the way to Pakistan in Asia. It was the largest empire in history, the second great empire after the Babylonian Empire. But the best we can tell, there were about 50 million people in the Persian Empire of that day. They had conquered the Babylonian/Chaldean Empire in 539 B.C. and the Persians had settled in to domination in the Middle Eastern world, and it lasted for two hundred years before they were replaced by the Greeks, who later were replaced by the Romans.

But initially the regions of Greece had been conquered by the Persians under Darius, and that would be back in 550 and following. Darius' armies had been defeated by the Athenians at the famous battle of Marathon in 490. Enraged Darius was determined to subdue his Greek enemies. He amasses a great army. He's going to go back and he's going to pay the Greeks for winning the battle at Marathon, that famous battle where a man ran 26 miles, and that is where we get the distance of

modern-day marathons. So the king, Darius, had great intentions to satisfy his thirst for vengeance. However, he died before he could exact his vengeance. And the quest for vengeance fell to his son, the son of Darius. This is a man named Xerxes, Xerxes—famous name to people who know history—who lives from 519 to 465 B.C., rises to power in 486, and when he takes the throne his first order of business is to deal with Egypt in Babylon because they're giving him trouble and he has to subdue them. He's unable then to set his sights on Greece, to wreak the vengeance of his father on them. But by the year 481, he's ready to attack. So Xerxes gets together to get vengeance on Greece for what they did during his father's reign. He gets together an army of 250 thousand men. They're stacked in modern-day Turkey, and they're waiting for orders to cross into Greece. Now, in order to cross into Greece, they're going to have to have a means to get across. They're making all the plans for that and they do it. Things, however, didn't go as Xerxes expected, and his armies reached Athens, they sack the city but the Greeks ultimately defeat the Persians and drive them back out of Greece.

There's some very famous battles—the Battle of Thermopylae, the 300 Spartans, you may know that; the Battle of Salamis, where the Persian navy is completely obliterated by the Greeks. I think they lost as many as 300 of their warships. All of that simply to say there is battle history going on between the Persian Empire, the reigning world empire, and the Greeks who are about to take possession of the world as the next great empire.

Xerxes fights repeatedly against the Greeks. And he has some measure of success, but more defeat than success until finally a man comes along by the name of Alexander the Great, who is a Greek, and the Persian Empire is defeated for good. And Alexander the Great conquers the Middle Eastern world and establishes as what we know as the great Greek Empire.

Now what does all this have to do with the book of Esther? And there are a lot more details about that, by the way, in the book *Twelve Unlikely Heroes*, but what does that have to do with the book of Esther?

Well, it has this to do with the book of Esther: the emperor whom the Greeks called Xerxes that I've been talking about has a different name in Persian—his name is *Khasayarsha*; in Hebrew, *Ahashverosh*; in your English Bible *Ahasuerus*, *Ahasuerus*, and that's the name you're going to find in the book of Esther.

The king in the book of Esther is none other than Xerxes, the son of Darius who fought the Greeks and ultimately lost the Persian Empire to the power of the Greeks. This is the man who tried to conquer Greece with a quarter of a million soldiers. This is the man, Ahasuerus, the king in the book of Esther, who is the one who becomes the ruler of that empire after the death of his father. And he is the man who has his heart conquered by this Jewish orphan named Esther. And when the opportunity came, she would use her influence to save the Jewish race from genocide. That's the

story of Esther, how one woman through the providence of God saved the Jews from genocide.

The book has her name, not because she wrote it; she didn't write it. We don't know who wrote it; maybe Mordecai wrote it, her cousin. Maybe Ezra wrote it; maybe Nehemiah wrote it or some other Jew dwelling at the time in Persia, somebody who understood the Persian scene and somebody who also understood the Jewish culture and had a detailed knowledge of both.

But whoever the author is, the real author of the story is God. Behind this richly played out labyrinth of events is divine providence, divine providence. So let's start at the beginning of the book. You can open to chapter 1; we're going to move very rapidly. The book opens by describing the expansive kingdom of Ahasuerus. And it stretches from Ethiopia, as I said, to the edges of India, all the way from modern Libya to Pakistan. He is not only the son of Darius, he's the grandson of Cyrus the Great; Cyrus the Great, the Persian ruler who decreed that the Jews could go back to their land after 70 years of captivity. That's how the book of Esther begins.

Many Jews went back to Israel under the decree of Cyrus, the grandfather of Xerxes. They went back; they rebuilt the city of Jerusalem. They rebuilt the temple, the second temple. They reestablished themselves in the land. However, there were a large number of those Jewish people who had been exiled to Babylon who remained there. They settled, they scattered, they proliferated, and they were all through that Persian Empire.

Several years into the reign of Ahasuerus or Xerxes, the book of Esther opens when he calls a six-month summit, does the king, in the capital city of Shushan, or Susa as it's called. This occurred in 483 B.C., and this is a strategic war planning meeting, a six-month war strategy session. And what is it about? The king is going to make his final preparations for the invasion of Greece that I told you about, which was unsuccessful. But he's going to make his plans. He is confident in his ability to knock off Greece, confident that his military forces are going to be triumphant.

So he ends the six-month summit of military planning with a seven-day banquet. Now look at your Bible and look at Esther chapter 1, and see the extravagant celebration that is held because of the anticipated victory. There were white and blue linen curtains, verse 6, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on silver rods and marble pillars. The couches were of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of alabaster, turquoise, and white and black marble. They served drinks in golden vessels, each vessel being different from the other, with royal wine in abundance according to the generosity of the king. This is a seven-day drunken orgy, if you will.

On the seventh day of the feast, Ahasuerus, after a week of intoxication and indulgence, decides he wants to put his wife on display, right? Her name is Vashti, Queen Vashti. So he commands his wife to show up on the seventh day and present herself in her royal regalia.

Well surprisingly she says, "I'm not coming to your party." Evidently concerned that her dignity would be tarnished when she appeared before a crowd of mostly men who were mostly drunk, she doesn't go. Some have suggested she may have been pregnant with their son, a man named Artaxerxes, familiar in history. She was uncomfortable with being seen in public. She said, "I'm not coming." Ahasuerus is furious. This is public insubordination. This is public embarrassment. This is making him look bad with the royal court, as well as all the people who were there. And according to chapter 1, verses 17 and 18, he's afraid that the king...that the queen's action will start a women's liberation movement; that if the queen can get away with this, then every woman is going to do this.

So he demotes her. She's no longer the queen and he spreads the word that she is through. He announces his intention then that he's going to get a new queen, he's going to get a new queen. And he makes very clear that no one can disobey the king, not even the queen or she will be deposed and replaced.

Ahasuerus, by the way, has a violent temper and it displayed itself in this action against his queen. Just a year later, in order for his massive army to march from Turkey where they were assembled, as I said, into Greece, Ahasuerus ordered that bridges be built across the Hellespont, that's that narrow piece of water between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean—they needed to get through there to get to Greece. And the bridges were, however, destroyed in a storm before the troops were able to use them. Ahasuerus was furious that the storm had destroyed the bridges they built. He thought that they had been built inadequately by the engineers, so he gathered all the engineers together and chopped their heads off. He then was furious with the water, so Herodotus, the historian—the Greek historian—says he sent soldiers into the water with whips demanding that they lash the ocean 300 times for its insubordination. And then he sent soldiers who threw shackles into the water to bind the water and to stab the waves with red-hot irons.

This is irrational rage, obviously. But this may be a bit of an explanation of why he treated his queen the way he did. Four years pass and there's no queen. According to Esther chapter 2, verse 16, four years pass before he gets around to selecting a new queen. Why four years? The answer is found in his two-year, unsuccessful invasion of Greece, the very thing we opened by talking about. The invasion of Greece happens in that two years and it occupies him so that he can't deal with the issue of establishing a queen. Persia's two-year, unsuccessful invasion of Greece historically fits right between Vashti's demotion in 483 or 482 and Esther's coronation in 479 or 478.

He finally is so frustrated by his inability to conquer Greece that he comes back home after two years of effort. And he decides that since the war is going so terribly badly, he needs a distraction. And the distraction will be selecting a new queen. Look at chapter 2, verses 1 to 4: "After these things when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's servants who attended him said, 'Let beautiful young

virgins be sought for the king and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel into the women's quarters, under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, custodian of the women." That's a harem, in case you were wondering. "And let beauty preparations be given them. And then let the young woman who pleases the queen [be queen] instead of Vashti.' This thing pleased the king and he did so." Okay, this is going to be an empire-wide beauty contest and we could make sort of a general assumption that if there are 50 million people in the Persian Empire, there are 25 million women to pick from—25 million. That's the scene.

At that point, the biblical text introduces us to the two main people in the story—two Jewish people who are cousins. They live in the city of Shushan as well. They are descendants of the original Jewish captives that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar in the Babylonian captivity. They were brought to Babylon a century earlier—or their parents, I should say—brought a century earlier around 597 and following.

The older of the two is a man named Mordecai and he's roughly fifteen years older than his young cousin, an orphan named Esther. Verse 7 says that her parents had died when she was very young and so Mordecai had raised her. So here in the middle of 50 million people in the Persian Empire, there are these two Jewish people. Her name in Hebrew is Hadassah, and it means "myrtle," a plant. Her Persian name, Esther, may be related to Ishtar, one of the Babylonian gods, and it may also be because of its similarity the Persian word for "star," for "star." So she may have been named Star, or she may have been named after the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, who just happened to be the goddess of love. That was not her Jewish name, but the Jews in exile were given Persian names, like Daniel and his three friends whose original names were Azariah, Mishael and Hananiah, but they became Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego, Babylonian names. That was a custom.

Now the Bible text, look at chapter 2, verse 7—says that it just so happened that this young virgin by the name of Esther was lovely and beautiful, lovely and beautiful. She didn't go unnoticed by the king's officials, so she was collected in the group that were to go to the palace and live in the harem with the concubines and participate in the contest for the queen. Josephus, the historian, says there were 400 virgins who were taken to the palace, 400. The thing went from whatever the amount of women they saw at first, down to the 400 most beautiful women. And they were taken to the palace because they were going to be there for a year and they were going to be allowed to kind of work on themselves for a year. And at some point when that year was over, they would be presented to the king and he would be able to make his choice. One of them would be elevated to be the queen. They had a year of primping, which seems a little unnecessarily long to get fixed up. But nonetheless, I don't exactly know what all might have gone on. A year of beautification. They were to look as beautiful as possible. They were to smell as good as possible. They were to use incense, cosmetics; they were to enhance their skin; they were to enhance their hair. They were to develop pleasant fragrances. They were to be given special instruction on court etiquette—how you act in the imperial

court and what all of the expectations were for someone who was around royalty. And this intensive training was to go on for twelve months. And at the end of that twelve months, each of these 400 women would have one opportunity to make an impression on the king to be selected as queen.

At the time, she would then adorn herself with whatever jewelry and whatever apparel she desired and she would be presented to the ruler. The day after her presentation, she would go back into the pool, back into the pool of waiting ladies, other concubines, members of the royal harem until the king had worked his way through the 400 and made his choice.

Esther is likely in her twenties. She has completed the year-long order, and it's her turn to appear before Ahasuerus, chapter 2, verse 16. So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tisbeth, in the seventh year of his reign. And then this, "The king loved Esther more than all the other women."

That must have been a very special lady, because after you've seen hundreds, it could all kind of blur. How do you stand out, out of hundreds? And she obtained grace and favor in his sight, more than all the virgins, so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king made a great feast, the feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of a king.

This is like a Cinderella story. Esther stole the king's heart. Esther became his queen. An obscure Jewish orphan, a child of exiled people, conquered people, is exalted to the highest position that any woman could have in the entire world at that time. This is no coincidence. There's a power working here greater than Ahasuerus, right? There's a power at work providentially, orchestrating his own purposes through the affections of the emperor. Significantly through the entire process, Esther keeps her Jewishness a secret. Mordecai told her to do that because there was much anti-Semitism in the Persian Empire. You can see that in chapter 4, verse 6. Esther would reveal that she was Jewish, but only at the very most important and necessary time.

So, Esther was chosen to be the queen. She is gone from being an obscure little Jewish orphan girl to being the queen, and it's driven by her physical beauty and her charm. Not long after Esther is crowned, and this is where the story gets fascinating, her cousin Mordecai is sitting at the entrance to the palace. He's hanging around the palace; why do you think? Who raised Esther? Mordecai, he's concerned about her. And so he hangs around the palace to get whatever word he can from her and about her. And while he's hanging around the palace, verse 21 tells us, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

He overhears a plot, a plot to kill the king, to assassinate the king. These were royal officials who guarded the king's private quarters. They had access to him and could readily kill him. They were angry. Maybe they were angry because of what he had done to Vashti. Whatever it was that

infuriated them, they were plotting to take his life and Mordecai just happens to overhear this. This indicates to us that Mordecai was in places in the palace that would have been off-limits for most people and that somehow he had been able to gain a place in the palace where he could hear conversations like this, which is a good indication that he may be held some kind of official position of prominence in the imperial government, perhaps solicited for him by Esther.

When he learned of the plot against the king, he reported it immediately. The message is so the matter became known to Mordecai who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. And when an inquiry was made into the matter, it was confirmed, both were hanged on a gallows. And listen to this, "And it was written in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king." The Persians kept records of absolutely everything. That's why we know so much about their history. And the king's chroniclers recorded what had happened—the plot—that it had been overheard by Mordecai, that Mordecai had informed Esther, and Esther had informed the king, and the king's life had been spared, and the two conspirators were hanged. Mordecai's actions were then written down in the royal record.

Why did they do that? Because those kinds of things needed to be rewarded and kings knew that. Loyalty needed to be rewarded as much as disloyalty needed to be punished. And at a future day, there would come a time when this man would be rewarded for saving the life of the king. Like all ancient monarchs, Ahasuerus was careful to honor and reward those who demonstrated loyalty to him. That's how he secured that kind of loyalty. And in order to be able to do that and do it well, they kept a record of acts of valor and special service rendered to the monarch.

Now all of that is chapter 2. You come in to chapter 3 and you're introduced to the next main character in the book which is a man named Haman, Haman. This is a man who had been exalted by the king, a capable man, a Persian man, a man who had been lifted up above other princes and other royal officials. But there's something very interesting about this man and this is key to the whole story. He was an Agagite, Agagite. It says that in 3:1-10; it says it again in chapter 8; says it again in chapter 9, it says, "Haman, the Agagite...Haman the Agagite." It keeps repeating that. That's not a small detail. It is the origin of Haman's hatred for Mordecai and his hatred for the Jews.

To understand why it's important to know that he was an Agagite, let's go back a little bit. Let's go back a thousand years, or almost a thousand years, to the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites come out of Egypt around 1445 B.C., so were about nearly a thousand years before. And they're attacked in the seventeenth chapter of Exodus by the Amalekites, remember that name? The Amalekites attacked them. The Amalekites are descendants of Esau, the one who sold his birthright. Because the Amalekites attacked the Jews, God curses the Amalekites and God's curse in Deuteronomy 25 says, "One day they're going to be extinct." God pronounces a curse on the Amalekites. God, the God of Israel, pronounces a curse on the Amalekites.

Four centuries later, King Saul conquers the Amalekites—you remember the story in 1 Samuel—and he captures their king and his name is Agag, the Amalekite king. Saul was supposed to kill Agag; he didn't do it. He let him live. And Saul incurred the Lord's displeasure, and for that and for other things that he did that displeased the Lord the throne was removed from his family and the prophet Samuel stepped in. And you remember what the prophet Samuel did with Agag? First Samuel 15, "He hacked him to pieces." Haman was an Agagite. And though almost a millennium had passed since the curse, and hundreds of years had passed since the hacking of Agag to death, Haman knew his family history and he knew that it was a Jewish man, a Jewish prophet by the name of Samuel, who had hacked his royal ancestor to pieces.

To make it worse, Mordecai is a descendant of Kish, chapter 2, verse 5. Kish is from the tribe of Benjamin, and Benjamin is the line of Saul. They knew their history. There was deep-seeded animosity between the descendants of Saul and the descendants of Agag for obvious reasons. And though nearly...What?...550 years had passed, both Haman and Mordecai—Haman the Agagite, Mordecai the Benjamite—had not forgotten the tribal feud that was so ancient.

The hostility erupts in chapter 3, look at verse 2; we'll read verse 2 and then down to 5 and 6. "All the king's servants who were within the king's gates bowed and paid homage to Haman for so the king had commanded. He had been elevated so high that everybody had to bow to him. But Mordecai wouldn't bow or pay homage. That feud settled in his heart deeply. He had nothing but animosity toward the cursed Amalekite descendant.

When Haman saw that Mordecai didn't bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. "But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, the people of Mordecai." He decided that he couldn't just kill Mordecai, or Mordecai's people would come and kill him, so he's just going to kill all of them, all of them.

So what does Haman do? He goes to the magicians and the astrologers and he says, "I want you to determine the optimum day by looking into your mystical sources and find a day to annihilate the Jewish people and we'll have genocide all through the Persian Empire on that one day." He then goes to the king and he says to the king, "This nation, this Persian Empire is full of Jews and they are a threat to the emperor. They are a threat to your throne and to your empire. And they ought to be eliminated." And he says, "They ought to be killed all the way back to Israel. We need to go all the way back to Israel and kill all of them, even those who returned. Haman says they're a threat to your throne."

Furthermore, if we kill them all, we can confiscate all their property and all their spoils and everything they own and a vast sum of money will come into the royal treasury. Ahasuerus says, "Great idea."

Hands his signet ring over to Haman so that Haman can stamp that signet ring on documents that will authorize genocide for the Jews. Haman hits the fast track, dispatches a royal decree, sends it all throughout the empire, and they did it like the Pony Express. A horse would ride as far he could ride with the message, another horse, another rider, go from there and the word was spread everywhere rapidly with fresh horses and fresh riders all across the parts of the Persian Empire and a date had been established. Look at verse 13 of Esther 3, “To destroy, to kill, to annihilate all the Jews both young and old, little children and women.” All of them.

In verse 3 of chapter 4, it says, “In every province where the king’s command and decree arrived there was great mourning among the Jews with fasting, weeping, wailing, and many lay in sack cloth and ashes.” A message stretched across the massive Persian Empire, very rapidly, that a date had been set for the people in all their own local areas to slaughter the Jews.

When Mordecai heard about this genocidal decree, he tore his clothes, he dressed in rags, he put ashes on his head, he mourned openly. He mourned publicly at this horrendous act, the mass murder of the entire Jewish population.

Was this just simple payback by Haman? No, it’s much bigger than that. Satan’s involved in this. Satan is involved in efforts to obliterate the Jewish people and thus to bring to a halt God’s purpose of redemption on their behalf.

Well it didn’t take long for the news to reach Esther. She gets the message. Mordecai informs Esther of what Haman has succeeded in accomplishing and even gives her a copy of the royal decree. And he says to her, “Esther, you have to go to the king and plead for the lives of your people.” Simple enough? Not so simple. In Persia no one, including the queen, went before the king without a personal invitation. Anybody who ventured to go into the presence of the king without being invited could be killed on the spot. Esther would not only be breaking royal protocol, but she would be risking her life.

Look at chapter 4, verse 11: “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king who has not been called, he has but one law, put all to death except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go into the king these thirty days.” The king hadn’t even seen her in thirty days. We have to be honest and say he had many other women. He didn’t get around to Esther for a month. She was afraid of potentially violating her irrational husband who had demoted Vashti for one act of non-compliance. And Mordecai was putting Esther in a position where she could lose her life.

Well, Mordecai comes back and calls for courage. Look at verses 13 and 14, chapter 4, verses 13 to 14—famous verses. “Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king’s palace any more

than all the other Jews,” Mordecai warned his royal cousin. Look, you’re dead if you do; you’re dead if you don’t. They’re going to find out you’re Jewish and you’re going to be dead if you don’t do anything. Don’t think you’re going to escape. “For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place but you and your father’s house will perish.” Wonderful confidence, right?—in the promises of God, the covenant of God with Israel to bless and sustain and preserve them. Mordecai says, “Look, God will deliver them another way but you won’t survive.” And then he says this famous line, “Yet who knows whether you’ve come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

He affirms divine sovereignty. He affirms his confidence in the revelation of God that he would preserve his people. But he also understands that Esther can perish and he can perish and many other Jews can perish if she doesn’t act.

Down in verse 16, embracing her divinely granted role, we read in verse 16, “Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan and fast for me,” she says. “Neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise and so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”

Even if it cost her life, she will do what she can to protect her people. Esther doesn’t mention prayer but she does mention fasting. There was no fast without prayer. For three days, she and others prayed and fasted. Her maids, very likely, would have been other Jewish girls who joined her in that prayer. She then approaches the throne. It must have been a tense moment, the seconds that she waited to see whether the king would extend his scepter to her and welcome his beauty into his presence. To underscore his response, chapter 5, verse 3. She comes, he looked at her, he extends the scepter and he asks a question in typical royal hyperbole. “What do you wish, Queen Esther. What is your request? It shall be given to you up to half the kingdom.”

Again he is wowed by her beauty and her presence. She doesn’t want half the kingdom. She doesn’t want any of the kingdom. She wants the lives of her people. So Esther’s reply was a simple request, and here is her reply. She asks Ahasuerus to put on a banquet for Haman and for her later that day. Well, he had to do what he offered to do. She didn’t ask for the half the kingdom; she did ask for a banquet for Haman—the king, the queen, and Haman. Esther 5; look at verses 5 to 8: so the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared, at the banquet of wine. The king said to Esther, “What’s your petition? It will be granted you. What is your request? Up to half the kingdom, it shall be done.”

“Then Esther answered and said, ‘My petition and request is this: if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if pleased the king to grant my petition, fulfill my request, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.’”

What is this? This is banquet number one. He says, “Okay, we’re here; we’re at the banquet. Haman’s here; I’m here.” Ostensibly the idea was to tell the truth about what Haman was plotting while he was there right in front of the king. Something happened—the timing wasn’t right—and she said, “Okay, here’s my request, can we do this again tomorrow?” Can we do it again tomorrow? For whatever reason the timing wasn’t right. She said, “Let’s meet tomorrow and have another banquet.”

Now Haman loved this, a banquet with the king and the queen—a private banquet with the king and the queen fit into his egotism very well. Haman left the feast feeling confident about himself and his achievement. Not only had Ahasuerus exalted him and lifted him up, agreed with his request to obliterate the Jews, but now the king and the queen had invited him not to one but two exclusive banquets, no higher honor could be given to any human than eating with the king, humanly speaking. So Haman heads back to his house.

On the way, he goes by the king’s gate and he sees Mordecai and just goes crazy with rage. He goes home and he says, “I’ve got to get rid of this man. So I will erect gallows and will execute him in the morning—perfect solution—this descendant of Saul, this Jew.” That night, Haman slept soundly. This is amazing. Dreamt of his revenge the next day.

On the other hand, Ahasuerus is back in the palace, tosses and turns—chapter 6 now—tosses and turns, can’t sleep. Whatever the cause of his insomnia, he does a really strange thing. He calls for the royal records to be read to him. Go get the royal records. Well, the royal records—he had been reigning for years and the royal records went back before him to his father and his grandfather. Go get the royal records.

Well, there could be a lot to choose from. Somebody went and got the royal records. I guess he thought, like counting sheep, that the monotony of reading the royal records, like reading the phone book, would put him to sleep. So somebody brings the royal records and he starts to read. And what he reads is the account of Mordecai’s action to expose the two conspirators who plotted to kill him. It was in the royal record. He had forgotten about it. Chapter 6, verse 2 and 3, it was found written that Mordecai had told of Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, the doorkeepers who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. Then the king said, “What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this? And the king’s servants who attended him said nothing has been done for him.” Five years before, Mordecai had reported the plot, never rewarded. Well, an eager Ahasuerus wants to make sure he rectifies that. Meanwhile, in the morning Haman arrives back at the royal court where he works and he goes to the king and asks the king if he can authorize the execution of Mordecai. He’s going to go and get permission to hang Mordecai.

But before he can say anything, Ahasuerus asks him a question, chapter 6 verse 6, “What shall be done for a man whom the king delights to honor?” He thinks it’s him. “What do I do for a man I want to

honor?" "Oh," Haman says, "give him a royal robe; let him ride on the king's horses. Let him have a prince to lead the horse through the city while proclaiming to the whole city, 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'"

In a shocking twist of expectations, Ahasuerus says, "Hurry then, and take the robe and the horse that you've suggested and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king's gate and leave nothing undone that you've spoken." Things aren't working out the way he wanted them to work out. Humiliation, shame, rage. Haman has no choice, so he is the guy who leads the parade for Mordecai through the city. And everywhere he goes, he says, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

When the whole disgraceful thing is over, he goes home; he's looking for comfort from his family and friends. He doesn't find it. Verse 13 of chapter 6, "When Haman told his wife, Zeresh, and all his friends everything that happened to him, his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai before whom you have begun to fall is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him.'" You're in trouble. If this is a Jewish man that is being so honored by the king, and you're trying to wipe him and all his people out, you are on the wrong side of this issue. The table's turned.

In confusion, Haman goes back to the palace, the same day, to the second banquet. Trying to steady his heart rate, sits down for another horrifying surprise. The king, again overwhelmed by affection for his queen, asks her what she wants. And here at the second banquet, she does not hesitate. Chapter 7, verses 3 and 4. "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition and my people at my request." Would you spare my life and the life of my people? "For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated."

Ahasuerus couldn't believe what he was hearing. To threaten the queen's life? The height of treason. The king is furious. Verse 5, "Who is he? And where is he who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?"

Sitting at the table, Haman, the noose is tightening around his neck. Surely, he thinks, the queen is not a Jew. And then with her hand pointed at the red-faced dinner guest, she says, "The adversary and the enemy is this wicked Haman." All I can say is, the king is gorged with fury—gets up, storms out into the palace garden. He remembered the empire-wide program that Haman had gotten him to authorize a couple of months earlier, how Haman had misrepresented the Jewish people as a potential threat to the empire and he had literally signed the decree into law that involved the murder of his own queen.

Well Haman's still at the dinner table. He falls at Esther's feet in front of the couch where she's at. He begged for his life. Ahasuerus, returning from the garden, blinded by anger, interrupted Haman's outstretched plea for mercy. He's down at the feet of Esther and he's pleading for mercy. And this looks very much like an assault on the queen to the king when he comes back in.

Verse 8, "Will he also assault the queen while I'm in the house?" Instantly royal guards covered Haman's face and they led him away to be executed. And how did they kill him? They hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. What a difference a day makes. Amazing. Twenty-four hours earlier, he was on top. That was yesterday. The king said, "Take all his property, give it to the queen." The queen gave it to Mordecai and the king exalted Mordecai, chapter 8, verse 2. Chapter 9, verse 4, the king exalted Mordecai and he became to the king of Persia like Daniel had been to the king of Babylon.

What was he going to do about the decree to kill the Jews, because once a king has made a decree, he can't rescind the decree? What's he going to do? He has to issue another decree to override the previous decree. Chapter 9, verse 3 and 4, "All the officials of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and all those doing the king's work helped the Jews because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them cause he had been so elevated. For Mordecai was great in the king's palace, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for this man, Mordecai, became increasingly prominent." Because the king had elevated Mordecai to such prominence, they knew the attitude that he had toward the Jews. And the word certainly would spread about the queen being a Jew as well.

He made a decree that the Jews could defend themselves against any effort to take their lives. They could prepare themselves for that day that had been established. He couldn't undo the establishment of the day but he could tell the people, "you don't have to do it, and the Jews can defend themselves." The day came, doomsday, March 7, 473 B.C. The Jews defended themselves—there were attacks; there were deaths. Over 75 thousand of the enemies of the Jews were slain as the Jews defended themselves and the king backed them up.

It was a day to remember, but not for the reason Haman had thought. That great day, March 7, 473 B.C., established a festival that the Jews celebrate today. They celebrate it at that time of the year, every year, right down the street at the Jewish synagogue. It's called, "The Feast of Purim" (P-u-r-i-m). *Purim* is from the Hebrew word for "lots" because Haman cast lots to determine the day on which he would exterminate the Jews. And so they took the word for lots and used it to identify that feast. It's a feast of triumph, celebration, the care of God. Listen to Esther 9:23 to 28, "So the Jews accepted the custom which they had begun as Mordecai had written to them because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to annihilate them and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to consume them and destroy them. But when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letter that this wicked plot which Haman had devised against the Jews should return on his own head and that he and his son should be hanged on the gallows. So

they called these days Purim after the name Pur, therefore because of all the words of this letter, what they had seen concerning this matter and what had happened to them, the Jews established and imposed it upon themselves and their descendants and all who would join them that without fail they should celebrate these two days every year according to the written instructions and according to the prescribed time that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city, that these days of Purim should not fail to be observed among the Jews and that the memory of them should not perish among their descendants.” And that is to this day, a two-day holiday of feasting, rejoicing, food sharing, gift giving, memorial feasting as the Jews celebrate the fact that they were delivered from being exterminated.

Long after Haman was hanged, Mordecai and Esther continued to flourish in the royal house of King Ahasuerus. The king exalted Mordecai to second in command, and continued to love his queen. Against all odds, Esther, Mordecai and the Jews had been spared, and not only spared but elevated, elevated. Esther 10 verse 3, “For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus and was great among the Jews and well received by the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen.”

Amazing story. At this point, we'll bring it to a conclusion. Where is God in the book of Esther? Well, the real hero in the story, the real power behind the story, is never mentioned, but it is God. His hand of providence is manifest in every single tiny detail. His presence is more powerfully and dominantly visible here than maybe in any other story of this complexity in Scripture, though He's never mentioned. His providence is at work in filtering down 25 million women to one, a Jew, chosen to be queen. His providence is demonstrated in Mordecai, being in a place where he could hear a plot and warn the king. His providence, his power, his superintending sovereignty can be seen in the night that the king can't sleep and decides to read the royal record and out of all that could have been read to him, what is read to him has to do with Mordecai being unrewarded. And even Haman's timing is perfect in the purposes of God.

The invisible hand of God is evident everywhere, everywhere. The absence of God here is, I think, intentional...intentional. It is an ingenious strategy by the writer to draw the reader to think deeply about how life's circumstances are ordered to the divine purpose. These are not coincidences—too many. This is not random. There is a designer. There is a coordinator. There is a power behind all of this. God literally thunders through the book of Esther. There are no miracles in the book of Esther, but the whole thing is a miracle of divine providence. People, places, time, action—it's more than miraculous. Not Haman, not Satan using Haman, could destroy the people of God, could put an end to the Abrahamic and Davidic promises, to the promises of the preservation of the nation for the coming of Messiah and the ultimate salvation of Israel. No one, no matter how they attempt to destroy the people of God and the purpose of God, can succeed because God's covenant love for Israel will be fulfilled, is being fulfilled.

And the message for you is this. While you're going through life and trying to make sure you fix all the little pieces of your life, understand this: that there is over and in, above and below your life a divine architect ordering every detail. And if you belong to Him and are in the covenant of His love, He is accomplishing His perfect will. And you can rest in that, you can rest in that.

The Lord is still on the throne. These are challenging times, challenging days to live in. You can become pretty distressed about the way things are going, the way things are going in the world is chaotic, disconcerting, troubling, disturbing, distressing, some ways frightening. Not so in the kingdom. The divine architect is ordering our lives, those of us who belong to Him and are in covenant love with Him. He is ordering our lives to His eternal glory, every part. How wonderful to live in that confidence, amen? Let's pray.

Father, we are so encouraged by the amazing story we have heard tonight. So thankful that You are the same God today that You were then. That all things are being worked together by Your power for our good and Your eternal glory. That is those who love You and are called according to Your purpose. We thank You that we don't live in a world of random events, but that our steps are ordered by the Lord. That You have a plan that is working out for us in every single detail, fits into Your sovereign purpose. How wonderful to know that and it is inexorably and inevitably leading us to glory, to heaven. Thank You for this great revelation that takes all the fear and doubt and questioning out of life, and we live and rest in peace in Your sovereign providence. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

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